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Experts Warn of Reduced Resources for WMD Response

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Seattle police officers participate in a 2003 exercise simulating the response to a radiological "dirty bomb" strike. A new expert report warns of the deterioration of U.S. capabilities to deal with an attack involving a radiological device or other weapon of mass destruction (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson).

WASHINGTON -- A government-ordered report released on Thursday found that federal resources dedicated to preparing the United States to respond and withstand a WMD attack had been reduced in a number of areas.

The [study produced by the Aspen Institute](#) at the request of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano raises the question of whether the country more than a decade after the Sept. 11 attacks is backsliding in efforts to prepare for an unconventional strike on the homeland, particularly an act of biological terrorism.

U.S. Northern Command, which leads Defense Department's homeland defense operations, saw the majority of its WMD response capacity taken away by the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, according to the report by a panel of nine experts. While the Homeland Security Department would head the response to a WMD incident, [the U.S. military](#) would be looked on as a source for assistance, particularly as local agencies might have just lost some of their own first responder capabilities.

Homeland Security, "and state and local authorities, may be expecting more help from DOD than could be delivered in a timely manner. Thus, DOD may have far less WMD response capacity (fewer resources with slower delivery) than some might have assumed," the analysis reads.

Additionally, Health and Human Services Department grants to state and local [public health agencies](#) and [medical readiness efforts](#) have been notably cut back, the Aspen Institute found. "The result has been [negation of much of the progress](#) made since 9/11 and degradation of capabilities through the National Disaster Medical System," according to the study.

The report further notes Congress' lack of progress this year in [renewing](#) the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act. The stalled biodefense legislation would reauthorize the Project Bioshield Special

Reserve Fund and its multibillion-dollar war chest for development and acquisition of medical countermeasures against dangerous pathogens and other WMD threats. The experts, though, noted the June HHS announcement of the establishment of [three centers](#) to spur creation of such medicines.

There is also a lack of cohesive planning between private businesses and local, state, and federal governments on how to sensibly integrate their capabilities to mount a comprehensive response to a WMD attack, the report says. "Readiness varies from department to department and from state to state. As a result, we are strategy rich and plan poor," panel members concluded. "Effective readiness requires that detailed planning be brought to a level of integrated and timely tactical execution."

The experts found that federal WMD response drills continue to be insufficiently difficult to prove worthwhile and that Northern Command had yet to stage a large-scale drill involving all 5,200 members of the Defense Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and High-Yield Explosive Response Force.

"For DOD and the entire federal interagency structure, exercises should involve a larger number of personnel, deployed in a challenging field environment," the study advises.

In presenting the report's findings on Thursday to the House Homeland Security Counterterrorism and Intelligence Subcommittee, study co-editor Randall Larsen said in [prepared testimony](#) he was worried "that we have once again fallen into a mindset best described by the 9/11 commission as a 'failure of imagination.'"

The retired Air Force colonel contended that while the majority of defense, public health, and first responder personnel at all levels of government are able to comprehend the WMD terrorism threat, he could not "say the same for many other appointed and elected officials. I base this assessment on the actions -- or should I say, lack of actions -- of these officials."

Larsen noted the [late 2008 findings](#) of the Congressional Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction that a WMD strike was likely to occur against some nation unless significant steps were taken, and that a biological attack was more probable than a nuclear event. Despite that warning, preparedness efforts to deal with such an assault lag far behind those to respond to a natural disaster, he said.

The Aspen report concludes that four years after the WMD commission report, the danger of a bioterrorism attack "remains undiminished." There is no proof that al-Qaida's failures to date have curbed its desire to produce biological weapons, and the systems and technology needed for such work "are dual-use and readily available," the report's authors said in citing the causes for concern on the threat.

The threats posed by acquisition of a nuclear weapon or radiological "dirty bomb" by terrorists or rogue states also persist, the report says, citing Iran's contested atomic activities and the instability in nuclear-armed Pakistan.

While al-Qaida must focus on avoiding total elimination, the terrorist network "is historically opportunistic," the Aspen panel said. "A weapon or fissile material on offer, perhaps in Russia, or, more likely, a chaotic situation in Pakistan could create a new opportunity."

The report offers nine recommendations for dealing with the current challenges, including renewing the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act, ensuring that policy-makers remain focused on the WMD threat, and addressing "the current void in planning, preparedness, and response regarding the effects of a nuclear detonation."